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ABSTRACT

Although women have made remarkable gains during the present century in terms of voting rights, education, and recreational and employment opportunities, the fact remains that their metamorphosis from "fair sex" to "full persons" is still an ongoing process. This paper examines certain historic educational and scientific attitudes which have been used to hamper such minimal successes as women have achieved to date (e.g., less than 1% of all amateur or professional athletes in the Western world are women). During the Victorian era, the ideas of the embryologist Von Baer were applied to adolescent psychology, with the effect that sports were urged for young men but ignored as an activity for young women. This attitude reinforced the prevailing educational arguments held against developing females mentally or physically. Changes in attitudes in the 1920s enabled sports for females to develop normally. (KM)

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by

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July 1985

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EDUCATIONAL ATTITUDES AND SCIENCE AS IMPEDIMENTS TO FEMALE SPORT AND SOCIALIZATION DURING THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

By

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Although women have made remarkable gains during the present century in terms of voting rights, education, and recreational and employment opportunities, the fact remains that their metamorphosis from 'fair sex' to 'full persons' is still an ongoing process. As late as 1985, only about 8% of all doctors and lawyers in the Western world were women; only 2% judges; 3% dentists; and 2% chemists, engineers or scientists. Less than 1% were amateur or professional athletes. The total emancipation of women awaits the future rise of these statistics to a state approaching relative parity.

In the meantime, it may be useful to examine the travails which accompanied even these modest gains. Indeeed, the final emergence of women as fully-functioning individuals in their own rights, with the same physical, spiritual and intellectual prerogatives as men, may well be facilitated by such an examination.

It is almost a cliche in today's world to say that the rights gained to date for women to full physical and intellectual development have been hard won. It is less well known, however, that these rights awaited changes in the ways in which women perceived their world, and that these latter changes further awaited the advent of substantive education (as opposed to the superficial "accomplishments") for females. Only with education did the gay-giddy, pale-frail ideal of womanhood change to an ideal of personal worth through equality, self-mastery and independence. Only with education did female sport cease to jeopardize the femininity of women or provoke societal wrath. And only with a shift in women's attitudes themselves toward both mental and physical culture, did societal attitudes shift in that same direction. Ultimately, society came to view virtually every aspect of femininity in a different and more liberal light, including women's health, diet, exercise, sport and fashion.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine in Part I the breakdown of some of the old verities which long hampered the educational emancipation of women as a necessary first step in the emergence of female sport. And it is a further purpose to consider in Part II how "science," i.e., "Von Baer's Law," buttressed traditional views of sport as a male prerogative by encouraging sport for boys while remaining silent on the subject for girls. The point is made in both sections that the same arguments against female education were often applied to the question of female sport as well.

Part I

Educational Attitudes Retardative of Female Sport

Victorian attitudes toward women were grounded in centuries of tradition. In his History of Animals, Aristotle had noted some of the essential differences between males and females. Females by nature were "more jealous, querulous, mischievous, impulsive and compassionate" than males, he wrote. At the same time, they were "softer, more prone to despondency, more apt to scold and strike, more deceptive and false of speech, more void of shame and self-respect, and more shrinking and difficult to rouse to action." Males, by their nature, Aristotle believed, were "more spirited, more savage, more simple, more hopeful and less cunning." Even among lower animals, nature made a differentiation in both the physical and "the mental characteristics of the two sexes." Males are "more courageous than females, and more sympathetic in the way of standing by to help," he declared. Thus, in the animal world, the "male is superior and the female inferior; the one rules and the other is ruled." Of necessity, this principle of male predominance "extends to all mankind," the "true intentions of nature" being revealed in the behavior of lower species. In the human family as in the animal kingdom, "the male is by nature fitter for command than the female." Thus, from early times, both the physical and intellectual spheres of the sexes were separate and distinct.[1] Did the full blown Age of Enlightenment build on Aristotle's clear thinking? One of its greatest philosophers, Jean Jacques Rousseau, called females "the sex which ought to obey." The whole education of girls, he wrote, "ought to be relative to men, to please men, to be useful to them, and to make their lives sweet and agreeable." The subsequent Age of Industry was, of course, a reaction to the humanist optimism of the 18th Century. Although its principal philosopher, Charles Darwin, was grandson of a ranking English feminist, he believed males superior both physically and in matters requiring "deep thought, reason and imagination." Whatever men took up, he wrote, whether science, history or philosophy, they clearly attained "a higher eminence than women." Such attitudes, of course, had clear implications regarding the intellectual and physical training of females.[2]

It was argued, for example, that schools would harden and deform girls and make them unattractive and unmarriageable, militating against the home and family (an argument later advanced against female sport). Physically, it was believed, girls' brains were too light, their foreheads too small, their reasoning powers too underdeveloped, and their emotions too easily worked upon to make serious students. Girls had a certain amount of superficial cleverness, it was widely agreed, and they could pick up a little of almost any subject. But they were far too shallow to go into anything very far. Intellectually, they were not up to the mark. But even if they could pass

their courses, their health might fail in the process; girls simply could not study as many hours per day as boys could. They could not be put through the same rigorous intellectual course as boys; some might even die in the process. And even should some survive the training, the intellectual rigor would make them harsh and competitive, when in fact girls were meant to be soft and submissive (also an argument later advanced against female sport). It was even thought that females study could impede the milk supply of mothers, interfere with their nursing capabilities, and in some cases cause infertility.

Even at the beginning of the present century, G. Stanley Hall, one of the foremost scholars of his day, and founder of the child studies disciplines, opposed co-education of the sexes in American high schools. "Bookishness is a bad sign in a girl," he wrote, and "suggests artificiality." Indeed, co-education might make boys effeminate and "attract them out of their orbit," and it could "functionally castrate" girls and cause them to "lose pride in their sex," and lapse into "mannish ways and ideals" (similar arguments were advanced against female sport). In any case, girls were weaker, especially during menstruation, Hall believed, and might not bear up under the strain of a male education. They should not "pluck the apple of intelligence at too great a cost of health," the eminent Harvard professor and university president wrote. Accordingly, Hall recommended a "humanistic and liberal" education for girls focusing primarily on "wifehood and motherhood." Certainly chemistry and physics were "too complex" for females and should be kept "at the elementary stages," he wrote. Zoology should be taught with plenty of pet animals, and botany should emphasize flowers and gardening. Again, Latin and Greek were too complicated, but conversational dinner French was not. And in no case should girls be trained to independence and self support. In fact, Hall wrote, "excessive intellectualism . . . instills an aversion to brute maternity," and this could doom the race to extinction, much the same as the celibacy of early Christian monks (an elite intelligentsia leaving no posterity) contributed to the arrival of the Dark Ages.[3]

While Hall's attitudes were widely held at the beginning of the present century, the feminist view was also well known, dating even to the French Revolution when Mary Wollstonecraft produced her Vindication of the Rights of Women, a work whose influence on the history of women has yet to be equaled. Wollstonecraft condemned the practice of educating girls only in the "miscalled accomplishments." Among the more popular of these were subjects like music, dance, reading, art, conversational French and Italian, writing, needlework, and work of travel and poetry. (Only a few of the better women's schools permitted more than a peep at the barest outlines of mathematics, science and language. One tongue was quite enough for a woman, it was often claimed). The accomplishments, Wollstonecraft wrote, mutilated the "mind and spirit," and reduced girls to the role of sexual beings and kept them in a state of

"specious innocence" and "perpetual childhood." Indeed, the trivial attentions and "regal homage" men heaped upon women (attending to doors, etc.), only "insultingly support(ed)" their own superiority. As long as women were beguiled by such "ludicrous ceremonies" which seemed to exalt, but really degraded them, they would continue to live in a state of "gilded slavery." With education women could learn to be "rational wives" instead of "alluring mistresses." They could stamp out the old humbug linking femininity and frailty by which women had so long been given to swooning and delicate health. Why labor "to be weaker than nature intended," she asked, when muscular strength, the main source of male superiority, had long been renounced by men themselves as inimical to the character of a gentleman. Such attitudes would eventually open the door to female sport, but even at the beginning of the present century they were only beginning to be truly felt. A remarkably liberated woman for her time, Wollstonecraft stated flatly to girls that it was not clever of them to pretend ignorance in the company of boys; it was not masculine to want a male education; education would not lower a woman's charm value, and neither would it diminish her capacities as a mother. The message worked with slow effect, however.[4] Even Erasmus Darwin's Plan for the Conduct of Female Education (1798), a radical feminist document for its time, called for an education which would instill in girls the "mild and retiring" virtues, as opposed to the "bold and dazzling" ones, and which would reinforce the "youthful timidity" and "blushing embarrassment" of young girls, these being, he wrote, "the most powerful of their charms."[5]

But the rise of industrial manufacturing and an entirely new class of working women was far more important than the works of Wollstonecraft or Darwin in the educational and later recreational emancipation of women. Industry began to change the very fabric of everyday life. Power looms, for example, gave rise to a new textile industry, and removed the production of clothing from home to factory. Increasingly, women's handiwork was done by machine, and increasingly, women and adolescent girls moved to large cities, where factories located to take advantage of power and cheap labor supplies. As young girls were exploited in the mills and sweatshops of the period, the traditional view of women as delicate flowers fit only for hearth and home could not long survive. In effect, the position of women changed from that of a parasitic class, which was generally acceptable to men, to that of a vast oppressed vassalage, which was unacceptable - particularly to men socialized in Victorian ethics, i.e., possessed of gallant and chivalrous instincts. It did little for their idealized view of girls as "graceful creatures" to watch them shovel coal in 160° heat at the smelting plant, naked from the waist up; or to see young women grow old before their time working 80-hour weeks, and often falling asleep at their machinery in the mills of the day. Indeed, education came to be seen as a means by which girls and women might obtain more gentle employment. An increasingly large number of men came to see education as a means by which girls could escape the degregation of this new serfdom, and also a means by which

they could hold on to or regain their natural femininity and womanhood. Whereas the view had been that education (mental and physical) would coarsen girls, it came to be that education would reinforce and actually strengthen their femininity.

At first, in the United States, a few schools admitted girls for an hour's instruction before and after school, while the boys were away. Others paid teachers a small additional fee to teach girls during the boys' lunch hour, or on Thursday afternoons, which was then a holiday from school. Still others admitted girls to studies from five until seven in the morning during the summer months - May through September - while most boys were away on harvest or vacation. Some schools simply gave the long term to boys and the short term to girls. Finally, by the middle of the 19th Century, a few girls were attending schools at the same times and in the same buildings as boys, but still usually in different rooms. If conditions required that a single room be shared, boys sat on one side and the girls on the other.

Very slowly, the traditional views concerning girls and education began to change, and imperceptibly, the place and position of women began to change. Personal lovliness came to mean something more than grace at pouring tea, or kindness, obedience, loyalty and usefulness. It came to embrace to a small extent the qualities of intellect and reason. Learning need not be acquired at the expense of femininity, many came to believe; and it was not necessarily assertive, mannish or uppity or conceited for women to want to develop their intellects beyond the point of mere literacy. In time, these same views would generalize to the physical development of women as well.

Part II

Victorian "Science" Retardative of Female Sport

The prominence of school boy sport in modern American high schools (and the relative unimportance of schoolgirl sport) owes much to "Von Baer's Law," a curious bit of academic wisdom of the 19th Century. Indeed, the "law," now discounted, was an article of faith in early child development theories, and while it constituted a scientific rationale for the inclusion of sport for boys in school curricula, it effectively barred girls from the same prerogative.

Simply stated, the law held that a parallel existed between the embryonic development of individual animals (ontogeny) and the historical development of their species (phylogeny). The ontogeny of every organism repeated in brief its phylogeny; or, put another way, the individual development of each organism repeated approximately the evolutionary development of the species.

Karl Ernst Von Baer (1792-1876), a Russian-born naturalist, and

one of the founders of the modern-day science of embryology (indeed, psychology as well, since psychology grew out of physiology, anatomy and embryology) had been impressed by striking similarities in appearance between the embryos of humans and those of lower animals. In the early stages, they could hardly be differentiated, he believed; moreover, as his disciple Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) later confirmed, as human embryos developed, they passed through readily observable, simple-to-complex evolutionary stages. At first, human embryos, like those of fish, seemed to posses gill slits and a two-chambered heart; later those gill slits closed and the heart seemed to take on reptilian (evolutionally advanced) characteristics and finally, in a late stage, the human embryo, like that of advanced primates, seemed to possess a tail. It seemed likely that embryonic development formed a condensed record of human development, that the embryo in the womb epitomized, or represented in miniature, the overall organic evolution of man.

If embryonic development recapitulated organic evolution, it was but a step away to say that individual human development recapitulated the historical evolution of man from savage to civilized being, that the developmental history of individuals was but a repetition of the course of development of the human race.

Applied to burgeoning child and adolescent development movements, Von Baer's law held that children passed through the same developmental gradations ontogenetically that the human race passed through phylogenetically; that youth, in their development, repeated approximately the development - from barbarity to civilization - of the human race. Adolescents, therefore, stood at a primitive developmental level; they were simply passing through a stage the human race had passed through thousands of years earlier. Indeed, in relation to adults, they stood at precisely the stage at which primitive man stood in relation to contemporary man. Adolescents lived the psychic lives of their ancestors; they were the "ancient savage let loose in modern man." Scratch the skin of the adolescent, a disciple of G. Stanley Hall wrote, "and you draw the blood of the savage."6

Thus was explained much of the adolescent's "untamed" and hitherto inexplicable behavior. It was instinctive, primary, compulsive, and fundamental. Even the play activities of youth were prima facie evidence of their unconscious remembrances of previous ages, for boys instinctively repeated in their play what prehistorical men had done for work. Adolescence was a throwback to prehistorical times and ancient war cries were still heard in the street play of youth. The love of adolescent boys for sport simply recalled a time when running, dodging and hitting skills were necessary for survival. The need of boys, as in baseball, to hit a moving object with a club, their need, as in javelin throwing, to hurl a spear long distances - these were but primitive impulses which had flowed across the centuries on down to contemporary times.

The adolescent boy's love for trophies, badges and awards harkened back to primitive headhunting and the taking of scalps. Swimming hole deja vu went to the emergence of primeval man from the sea. Boys were drawn to caves and secret hideouts by the necessities of ancestral survival, from a time when exposure had often meant death. (It was because of primitive impulse that Tom Sawyer posted lookouts at his cave.) Boys loved circuses and dreamed about wild animals because ancient hunts were imprinted on their brains, and they feared the woods at night from instinctive impulses - now weak and now strong - hoping to realize the conditions of early man.

Adolescent conformity went directly to the "herding instinct" so necessary for early man's survival, and adolescent cruelties went to a time when only the cruel and merciless survived.

Even juvenile delinquency, school truancy and the problem of runaways were explained in terms of Von Baer's Law. Delinquency represented acts that in the past had fitted their ancestors for survival. Gang fights and the throwing of sticks and stones were but throwbacks to the joys of battle in tribal warfare. Indeed, it was only normal, one scholar wrote, that adolescent boys should go through a period of "savagery and semi-criminality." It would be strange if boys did not take by force and stealth what they needed or wanted, just as primitive man had done. There could hardly be any doubt, he wrote

> but that there is a time in the life of every normal boy when primitive impulses, the reverberations of savage life, carry him on, with almost resistless fury, toward a life of crime. When to these native impulses there is joined an environment favorable to crime, there can be little hope for successful resistance.[7]

Likewise, sexual delinquency was explained as a reverberation of primeval energy and a shifting from the "herding instinct" to the "mating instinct." School truancy was explained not so much as a revolt against the oppressive gloom of the schoolroom, but as the occasional surfacing of the hereditary instinct for vagabondage. Youth played "hooky," not from youthful depravity, but from a reversion to the migratory habits of primitive ancestors. Running away from home and jumping freight trains were recapitulations of man's nomadic past. In their wanderlust, youth heeded the call of the wild. Indeed, "it was not so long ago," a scholar wrote,

> that primitive man wandered from place to place, remaining in one spot only so long as he could live comfortably or until driven away by superior enemies. It would be strange

indeed if after all those long ages of forest life, there should be left no impression of this on his decendants.[8]

The implications of this early theory of child development were broad indeed. It was assumed, for example, that instincts which governed youthful behavior (even though they were "in contention with modern ethics and culture") were legitimate and therefore good. They had been useful for survival in the past and, on the whole, they were still useful, otherwise they would not have survived. The laws of natural selection would have eliminated them. One implication, therefore, was that instincts were not to be suppressed or rooted out. Indeed, they were to be tamed or "drained off" or otherwise made use of by way of promoting the social growth of youth. The task of educators and others who worked with youth was to redirect these impulses into educational channels - to channel instincts into constructive areas which satisfied "the racial claim," as one scholar put it, "and at the same time (had) social worth." Adolescent boys must be given the adventures they instinctively craved, or they would make their own adventure fighting in the streets. "We must make life spirited," Professor Edgar Swift wrote, or boys "will break its bounds and find other adventures." Let them feel in sport (such as the new game of football), the thrills that "tingled through the nerves of primitive man in danger."[9]

Thus, the sport of football was present at the creation of the American high school during the waning years of the 19th Century. The idea was to channel the genetically endowed aggressiveness of boys into a constructive vein. Better to bring their aggressions out into the open and to let them surface under strict rules and supervision, than to permit them to erupt of their own accord on the streets. The objective of the sport was to alchemize, to transmute "fight" into "game" and in the doing to do good - to develop strong bodies, "build character," engage the time youth might otherwise spend in the pool room, peep-show or penny arcade and weaken (through physical exhaustion) the "mating instinct," thus making boys less susceptible to sexual delinquency. Boys were going to "slug it out" anyway, the reasoning went. Better to provide a safe outlet, better that the battle be planned, supervised, wholesome and constructive. By appealing to their native instincts, society could promote the physical, moral and mental well-being of youth.

So strong were these interpretations of Von Baer's Law that the sport of football prevailed, even against the denunciations of many of the leading educational lights of the day. One educator called the game a "boy-killing, education-prostituting, gladitorial sport"; another called it "madness and slaughter" (62 boys had died of injuries by 1902, 12 in that year alone). But the game had a scientific rationale, and it was thought to do more good than harm. It not only drained off animal spirits and moderated youthful sexual

appetites, but its fiercely competitive nature seemed to champion capitalism and stress social Darwinism as well. These alone seemed sufficient reasons to include sport in the school curriculum.

Von Baer's Law was also influential in other areas, such as the scouting movement, begun in 1910. If youth instinctively loved the woods, which was their primal source, if they never tired of camping, hiking, mountain climbing, spelunking, hunting, boating and fishing because such play recapitulated ancestral work, then here was yet another instinct to be harnessed and put to use. Not only could the need of youth for outdoor life be accommodated, but socially useful values (reverence, patriotism, trustworthiness, obedience) could be promoted as well. Inherited tendencies could be transformed into educative forces. By returning youth to their subconsciously craved natural world, their physical, mental and moral well-being could be looked after. Scouting, like football, was present at the creation of American adolescence. Both were built on what was believed to be sound psychology and shrewd insight into human nature. The scout den, pack or patrol satisfied the "herding" instinct: indeed, it was but a youth gang defanged, systematized and supervised. Adolescents had no notion as to why they craved learning to build a fire without matches, to swim long distances, to handle a canoe or horse, to find their way across country, to use sign languages, signals and passwords or to track campanions or spy upon hostile camps without being discovered. But science did, and the idea was to take this natural instinctive part of growing up, add nothing to it whatever, and deliberately exploit the instinct and use it to guide youth toward acceptable values and behaviors.

Conclusion

Educational attitudes going all the way to Aristotle tended to stand in the way of both the intellectual and physical emancipation of women until relatively modern times. Arguments against mental culture for women were often the same agruments advanced against their physical training as well. Only with dramatic changes in socio-educational attitudes, and with the renunciation of Von Baer's Law during the 1920's, was female sport left free to develop along normal lines.

Notes

1. Aristotle's view that even male and female fish differed in their mental characteristics (males stood by to help females caught on fishing spears, whereas when males were struck, females swam away in fear) is in his History of Animals, Book IX, Chapter I. His belief that the "intentions of nature"

are found in the behavior of lower species is in his Politics, Book I, Chapter V.

2. Whatever women wished to do, Rousseau wrote, they should contrive to have their husbands order them to do it. See his On Inequality and On Political Economy in Robert M. Hutchins (ed.) Great Books of the Western World (Chicago: William Benton, 1952) v. 38, pp. 319, 346, 367-68. See also Rousseau's L'Emile, ed. W.H. Payne (New York, 1906) p. 263. For the Darwin quote, see also the Hutchins series, Descent of Man, v. 49, p. 566.

3. G. Stanley Hall, Adolescence (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1905; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), v. II, pp. 609, 622-646.

4. Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (London: J. Johnson, 1792; reprint ed., New York: Source Book Press, 1971) po. 15-58, 99-131. See also, Eleanor Flexner, Mary Wollstonecraft(New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1972) p. 155, 163.

5. Erasmus Darwin, A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education In Boarding Schools (London: J. Drewry, 1797 and Philadelphia, 1798; reprint ed., New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968) pp. 1-12, 32-39, 66-68, 88.

6. Edgar James Swift, Youth and the Race: A Study in the Psychology of Adolescence (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), p. 73.

7. Edgar James Swift. Some criminal tendencies of boyhood. Pedagogical Seminary, 1901, v. 8, p. 89.

8. Swift, Youth and the Race, pp. 6, 64-65, 104.

9. Ibid, p. 31, 221.